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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SAI AND ISCI: UNLIKELY ALLIANCE, UNCLEAR RESULTS

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶1.](#) (S/NF) This is a joint Baghdad POL - Karbala and Najaf PRT cable.

[¶2.](#) (S/NF) Summary: The Ramadi-based Iraq Awakening Movement (SAI) hopes to expand into the south to increase the standing of Ahmed Abu Risha and the strength of the SAI relative to the Tawafuq Bloc. National GOI and ISCI leadership have been receptive to SAI's secular anti-AQI message and its potential to help over Article 140 negotiations, although it is unclear whether this support is shared by provincial officials and unlikely that SAI will ever transform itself into a pan-Iraqi political movement. End Summary.

SAI's unlikely alliance with ISCI

[¶3.](#) (S/NF) In the fall of 2007, Sheikh Ahmed Abu Risha and a handful of SAI members made forays into establishing a presence in mixed Shi'a-Sunni areas and into the south. These efforts were at least tacitly supported by ISCI and the marja'iyya. Ahmed met with ISCI leader Ammar al-Hakim and Badr head Hadi al-Amiri and sheikhs from Najaf and Karbala in October 2007. Ahmed also met in July and October 2007 with Karbala governor Aqil al-Khazali as well as Karbala sheikhs. ISCI has also facilitated reciprocal visits of religious scholars from Anbar and the Shia heartland, and ISCI Chief Abdel Aziz al-Hakim is fond of telling interlocutors that such visits would have been "unimaginable" only a few months ago. In December SAI and ISCI agreed to form a joint committee to facilitate IDP/refugee returns to Anbar, although negotiations are still underway. Separate reporting indicates that teachers and students in the Najaf hawza believe the marja'iyya supports awakening councils in southern Iraq and credit improved road security in areas controlled by the SAI for enabling students to travel from Baghdad to Najaf to pursue religious studies. According to an ISCI source, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani met in late 2007 with senior Sunni religious scholars from Ramadi in a visit that sprung from the burgeoning ISCI-SAI relationship.

[¶4.](#) (S/NF) For both groups this unlikely alliance could provide tangible political gains. For ISCI, support for SAI promotes the perception of ISCI and Badr as nationalist, Arab institutions and showcases Ammar as an emerging national leader. ISCI's flirtation with SAI and Sheikh Ahmed is presumably driven in part by the Shia group's interest in locating an Anbar ally with whom it can discuss Karbala's border expansion, per the current Article 140 dispute between the two provinces (Note: Ahmed, during the Ambassador's January 20 visit to Ramadi, in a meeting attended by Anbar's Governor and other notables, clearly stated his opposition to ceding control of Anbar's Nukhayb region to Karbala. End note). For both the Marja'iyya and ISCI, supporting an expansion of the SAI is also a way to co-opt the tribes and preempt the emergence of any independent movements hostile to establishment interests. Likewise, Ahmed is likely using the

meetings to increase his standing as a national, rather than provincial, leader and to increase its strength versus the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP).

Provincial opposition and unclear results

¶5. (S/NF) Despite these possible benefits, the sincerity of support for SAI expansion is suspect among both national and provincial leaders. Karbala Governor Aqil (Dawa) explicitly opposed the establishment of an SAI office in his governorate. In a November 2007 article the ISCI-linked Sawt an-Najaf newspaper warned that creating Sunni or Shi'a awakening councils in Najaf would open the door to foreign interference. In December 2007 two leaders of the Community of Independent Iraqis (including an AmCit) were arrested by Najaf security forces after trying to found the "Awakening Council of Najaf." Najaf Governor al-Ta'ie (ISCI) said the council did not follow correct procedures and maintained he received permission from PM Maliki to investigate and arrest the leaders.

¶6. (S/NF) Due in part to ISCI ambivalence, the tangible results of this ISCI-SAI alliance and the expected role for southern SAI offices are unclear. In a December 2007 letter addressed to the Wasit Provincial Council, Ahmed asked for their support in opening SAI offices in Wasit. He referenced the October meeting with Hakim and quoted Sistani as saying "The awakening of Iraq is the fragrant tree of Iraq" to argue that the marja'iyah and ISCI supported the expansion of SAI into the south. Ahmed promised that the SAI would work in the national interest and respect all provincial authorities and laws. We do not know the response to this letter although the Governor and PC are resisting any such effort.

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Wasit Governor Turfa (independent) has refused to meet with sheikhs wishing to establish an SAI branch in the province and the head of the Wasit Directorate for Tribal Affairs has threatened to arrest the sheikhs for distributing SAI applications to tribal leaders. (Note: Further details on SAI's efforts to expand into Wasit will be reported septel. End Note.) Although it is unconfirmed, we assume that similar letters were sent to other south-central governorates.

¶7. (S/NF) Comment: ISCI's support for SAI's southern expansion is partly an effort to channel tribal frustrations into institutions friendly to the establishment. It is unlikely that SAI will ever transform itself into a pan-Iraqi political movement with popular Shi'a support. It is also unclear if ISCI will continue its support if SAI's expansion serves as a catalyst for greater tribal engagement in politics. End Comment.
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